

ROMANTIC LOVE AS ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE OF FILM NARRATIVES

In social life, romantic love acts as social validation, path to intimacy and getting wife for men, economic and class advantage for women, a way to gratify infantile needs, compulsory heterosexuality. Male privilege: I'm going to make you love me. Note how many ways film utilizes conventions of courtship. Kate Millet on courtship as privileged time for middle class women, fantasy for the economically deprived woman.

In film, easy tactic for audience identification. Create broad basis of lust for narrative. lust for that image. Male and female characters' relation to courtship or love in the narrative. The woman may be in the narrative primarily for the courtship. Male characters as actors with other things to do -- the concept of agency.

Assignment of traits -- adjectival appellations. Note what traits elicit a judgment of good or bad, datable or not datable, complex personality or single attribute, interesting or not interesting, powerful or not powerful, of major narrative interest.

Note how women get polished off in the narrative, especially if sexually active. How do narrative developments depend on assumptions about sex roles or the "traits" of men and women? (HIGH NOON and SERPICO have man following duty and woman holding him back, for example.)

ASK HOW NARRATIVE WOULD CHANGE IF CHARACTERS WERE AGE 16 OR IN THEIR SIXTIES, IF ONE LOVER WERE BLACK AND ONE WHITE, IF IT WERE A GAY OR LESBIAN COUPLE, IF THEY WERE VERY POOR, IF ONE OR BOTH WERE IN A WHEELCHAIR, OR IF VARIOUS OF THESE CONDITIONS WERE IN PLACE AT THE SAME TIME?

Common splitting of female sexuality: mother, virgin, jezebel, shrew, mad woman, ingenue. City vs country woman, nature vs artifice, fertile vs sterile, sincere vs insincere, make up and jewelry and satin vs cotton and simple. Halo light, close ups, tie-in to fashion industry, high heels.

NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS IN CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

(Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson)

Norms and a group film style -- flexible, stimulates making the work, related to craft, materials, interface with everyday mores, aesthetic goals, and a series of bounded alternatives. Devices, systems (representation of time, space, sexual/gender codification, etc), relations of systems.

Gombrich: Artists use schemata, traditional formal patterns for rendering subject matter. Viewers propose, test, and discard hypotheses based on expectation and probability. "A style, like a culture or a climate of opinion, sets up a horizon of expectations, a mental set, which registers deviations and modifications with exaggerated sensitivity."

Narrative logic = causal relations, definition of events, and parallelisms between events.

Sound, lighting, editing, composition, camera movement can be used to show causes or parallels, or to create emphasis.

Causality is character centered, rather than impersonal (ie, flood, war). If flood or war start narrative, switches to character-centered causality soon.

Psychology, type, traits are sharply delineated and unambiguous; character consistency, speech and physical behavior and costume are used as projection of personality; use of recurring motifs to delineate character traits; the person's goals shape causality and also narrative duration.

"The classical film has at least two lines of actions, both causally linking the same group of characters. Almost invariably, one of these lines of action involves heterosexual romantic love. Of the 100 films in the unbiased sample, 95 involved romance in at least one line of action, while 85 made that the principal line of action. Screenplay manuals stress love as the theme with greatest human appeal. Character traits are often assigned along gender lines, giving male and female characters those qualities deemed "appropriate" to their roles in romance. To win the love of a man or woman becomes the goal of many characters in classical films. In this emphasis upon heterosexual love, Hollywood continues traditions stemming from the chivalric romance, the bourgeois novel and the US melodrama.....The tight binding of the second line of action to the love interest is one of the most unusual qualities of the classical cinema, giving the film a variety of actions and a sense of comprehensive social 'realism' that earlier drama achieved through the use of parallel, loosely related subplots."

Theatrical troupe composition since the time of Moliere, the devil's wife in medieval theater, and the star system, especially for female stars, indicates how theatrical casting is thought of in terms of the conventions of representing heterosexual romance.

PERSONALIZED CAUSALITY

versimilitude -- sets, props, costumes, social plausibility
genre plausibility

Note what is communicated and what hypotheses are set in motion by the credits, opening sequences, first glimpse of a character or locale, first actions.

These are usually heavily expository.

Omniscience and homogeneity and omnipresence: "The narration is unwilling to tell all but it is willing to go anywhere....Tendency (is) to collapse narration into camerawork: the camera can roam freely, crosscutting between locales or changing its position within a single room." Drops narrational hints.

Repetition's rule of threes: an event becomes important if it is mentioned three times-- once for the smart viewer, once for the average viewer, once for the slow Joe in the back row. The epilogue or narration summary at end.

MUSIC AS PART OF THE OMNISCENT NARRATION. Wagner as model: gesamtskunstwerk. Musical conventions.

Spectators form hypotheses. What is probable? If this, not that -- basis of exclusivity. Several things considered at once -- may be guilty, may be not guilty -- simultaneity. Hypotheses get ranked in order of probability and narrowed to a few distinct alternatives. Surprise and disorientation are secondary to suspense as to which alternatives will be confirmed.

IN TERMS OF SEXUAL REPRESENTATION, NOTE THE CONVENTIONALITY OF THE FEW DISTINCT ALTERNATIVES THAT A NARRATIVE GETS NARROWED DOWN TO.

STORY ORDER-- chronological, in medias res, flashback -- usually motivated by character memory, rarely flashforward. Psychological causality will guide us toward the motifs and actions already marked as potentially meaningful. "Tag" certain things for recall, eg. foreshadowing. Deadlines are often given in the narrative itself, as in making an appointment or a date. Use of montage sequence for compression. Films can also be based on routines and cycles. In editing, shot change usually precedes dialogue change.

Dissolves and fades and wipes conventionally indicate different lapses of time and/or place.

Metz's categories: 1) screen time= real time. 2) Unimportant things left out. 3) Representative moments shown. Note how 2 and 3 erase images of labor, especially domestic labor. 4) Crosscutting on actions or symbolically uses consecutive order, ellipsis, and/or an overall sense of simultaneity.

SPACE, COMPOSITION, AND EDITING

Rule -- keep important subjects in same area of frame from one cut to other.

Painting tradition -- centered subject. A T-shaped area is privileged: upper one third of frame and center vertical third.

Extreme long shots follow landscape tradition and weigh the lower half of image.

To center the figure, use the camera movement for reframing, or cut to show where the figure has gone when it crosses the frame line = frame cutting. Frontality, make body face the camera; if back to us = unimportant for the moment.

Lighting is in stacked planes and emphasizing roundness.

"Cinematographers were careful to alternate planes in contrasting keys and half-tones (a silhouetted foreground, a bright middle ground, a darker background). Hollywood's standardized three point lighting system (key, fill, and backlighting) supplemented by background lighting, eye lights, and other techniques, has as its effect the careful articulation of each narratively relevant plane...A pencil line of light around the body's contour pulls the figure forward. Edge lighting of figures remained common even after fast film stocks and color films enhanced figure separation."

Classical cinema uses planes and volumes much more than renaissance perspective -- it's built up out of planes rather than a vanishing point.

Similarly sound is layered in volume and reverberation., especially on the principles of balance, centrality, and spatial

definition. These principles and the narrative organization of depth encourage us to read filmic space as story space. Especially doors personalize space in terms of focusing on characters' actions, as do props and close-ups. The organization of film space cues the viewer narrationally. Both camera movement and continuity editing, especially shot-reverse-shot, aids omniscient narration and "makes narration covert by creating the sense that no important scenographic space remains unaccounted for. If shot two shows the important material outside shot one, there is no spatial point we can assign to the narration; the narration is always elsewhere, outside this shot but never visible in the next."

The construction of an ordinary sequence is patterned like the film itself. It opens in a self-conscious narrational way, in an omniscient voice, "with signs, ostentatious camera movements, and telling details leaving the traces of a relatively overt narration." Then the character-oriented chain of causality takes over. We may then have a cut, or a sound-image juxtaposition, or a musical cue, or a detail stressed at the end of the sequence that aids the transition to the next scene.

Both the sequence and the film as a whole rely on the same viewing activities elicited in the spectator -- "creating and checking first impressions; linking actions by their anticipated consequences; weighing and testing alternative hypotheses about causality, time and space."